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A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF VIRGINIA BEACH DOG PARK USERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at a Virginia Beach, Virginia (VA) dog park as a case study exploring the benefits and perceptions of dog parks by its users. The qualitative methodology follows an earlier dog park study by Gómez (2013) in Norfolk, VA. Our findings indicated three major themes: (a) dog exercise, (b) socialization for dogs (and humans), and (c) safe off-leash place. Findings from Virginia Beach are compared to earlier findings in Norfolk.

1.0 Introduction

Dogs are permanent members of U.S. families. In the United States, there are 78.2 million dogs in 46.3 million households (American Veterinary Medical Association, n.d.). Given the prevalence of dogs as “members of the family,” there is a need to walk them to places where they could exercise, have play dates, and socialize with other dogs near their homes. With the U.S. becoming more urbanized, dog parks have emerged as an answer to dense urban communities, and they continue to grow in popularity (Avarasin, 2003; Lee, Shepley, & Huang, 2009). The first dog park was established in Berkeley, California in 1979 (Allen, 2007; Brittain, 2007; Harnik & Bridges, 2006). Today, there are an estimated 2,200 dog parks in the U.S. (Urbanik & Morgan, 2013). However, although there has been much growth in dog parks, relatively little empirical research exists on the benefits derived from, or perceptions of, its users. The purpose of this research is to investigate the perceptions and benefits derived from dog parks by its users.

The dog park movement began in 1979 with the establishment of Ohlone Dog Park in Berkeley, California (renamed Martha Scott Benedict Memorial Dog Park), which has often been cited as the first “official” dog park in the United States (Allen, 2007; Brittain, 2007). Since then, dog parks have been known as “bark parks,” “off-leash recreational areas (OLRAs),” “dog runs,” “pooch parks,” or “paw parks,” among other names (Batch, Hale, & Plevsky, n.d.; Brittain, 2007; Krohe, 2005; Shyan, Fortune, & King, 2003). A public dog park is defined as “an area of public space (often fenced in) where companion dogs can lawfully be off leash” (Jackson, 2012, p. 255). The dog park movement had its origin during the same era as the animal rights movement (Dyke & Phillips, 2000; Tuohey & Ma, 1992) and the prevalence of off-leash laws (Shyan et al.).

2.0 Literature review

Gómez (2013) noted that dog parks are “this millennium’s new playgrounds” (p. 88). Dog parks offer benefits that are both immediate and pervasive. For example, immediate benefits include having a space for dogs to run off-leash, dog-dog socialization, dog-human socialization, and exercise for dogs (Allen, 2007; American Kennel Club, n.d.; Lee et al., 2009). Do parks have benefits beyond their immediate surroundings? For example, studies support the notion that dog parks improve sense of community (SOC) in neighborhoods (Lee et al., 2009) and decrease crime/increase safety (Wolch & Rowe, 1992). Dog parks also have some negative aspects associated with them, such as, dogs being noisy and smelly (Avrasin, 2008) and having aggressive dogs (Gómez, 2013; Shyan et al., 2003).

An impetus for dog parks was the advent of leash laws in the 1980s (Brittain, 2007; Krohe, 2005; Shyan et al., 2003). Leash laws vary from state to state and in many cases from city to city. Although no national leash laws have been enacted in the U.S., Wisch (2004), from Michigan State University’s Animal Legal and Historical Center, provided an excellent overview of leash laws throughout the U.S. Of particular note is that leash laws come in a variety of forms, and most of them are dictated by local and municipal decree, rather than state decree. According to Wisch, leash laws take the following forms: (a) general, state-wide dog leash law; (b) laws prohibiting dogs running at large; (c) laws prohibiting dogs running at large between sunset and sunrise; (d) laws stating that dogs must be kept on a leash in rabies quarantine areas; (e) laws stating dogs be kept on a leash in protected areas, such as beaches and parks, (f) laws stating dogs in heat or dangerous be kept on a leash, (g) laws regarding controlling one’s dog; (h) laws for assistance dogs (guide dogs); and (i) laws allowing localities to create their own leash ordinance or referendums.

The general view, especially by people who do not have a dog, is that dogs should be kept on a leash to prevent any potential problems such as (a) between one’s dog and people (allergic reactions, biting, barking); (b) between one’s dog and another animal (biting, aggression, wildlife); (c) property problems (urination, defecation, digging, trampling plants); and (d) the protection of the dog itself (untrained, lost, or getting hit by a car). These laws excluded dogs involved in hunting, exhibitions, and competitions, and in some cases leashes are not needed if the dog is under reasonable control.

However they have been conceptualized, leash laws were viewed by dog caretakers as a violation of their dogs’ rights, which led to animal and dog park activism. This was much like the reaction playground advocates had towards children being arrested or fined for playing in the streets. In both cases, activists called for open space in order to release pent-up energy to alleviate boredom and destructive behaviors, which would not happen if there were no restrictions on their ability to play. It is important to note that these are grassroots initiatives.

Krohe (2005) observed that dog park activism began due to the “widespread adoption of leash laws in the 1980s, a phenomenon that turned many dog [caretakers] into law breakers ... [who considered running] dogs unleashed [as] a justifiable act of civil disobedience” (p. 24). As an example, Krohe noted Seattle, WA dog caretakers’ protests to leash laws in the 1980s led to the establishment of a 40-acre off-leash area, and the proliferation of these leash law citations from 300 to 1,200 in one year in the early 1990s led to the formation of COLA (Coalition for Off-Leash Areas). COLA managed to persuade Seattle residents and leaders to set aside nine

additional dog parks in Seattle shortly after its formation. Although much has been documented on the development and advocacy for (or arguments against) a dog park, little research exists on the perceptions of dog park users and specifically

3.0 Methods

Virginia Beach (VB) dog park users of the Red Wing Dog Park (RWDP) were approached in the fall of 2010 to answer a two-page survey regarding dog parks, and weekend/weekdays were alternated to include morning and evening times for a period of two months. Red Wing Dog Park is much less a community hang-out than it is a dog park. The park is relatively hidden in the rear of a larger park which has a garden, tennis and basketball courts, shelters, a large field for sports, and a supervisor's hut. The dog park is an enclosed section near the back of the park. There are some small trees planted around the park, a few have benches built around them

The general benefits derived from the RWDP came from semi-structured face-to-face surveys ($N = 109$). Interviewers gave respondents the option of a self-administered or researcher-administered format to help dog owners maintain control of their dogs. Recording equipment was not available, but interviewers were trained to take notes verbatim when researcher-administered. Data were analyzed using three steps: individual interviews were coded to identify recurring themes; subthemes within themes were drawn out; coding was then checked by four others (one colleague, one graduate student, and two upper-level undergraduate students) for the purposes of triangulation—all trained in the grounded theory approach (Leedy & Ormond, 2001). Additionally, two colleagues were contacted who were experts in qualitative research, but not related to the project, as an external auditing procedure to increase validity. Final agreement between raters related to frequency of responses for the themes ranged from 92.8% agreement to 94.7% agreement. While the participants were asked several open-ended questions, for the purpose of this presentation we will be examining the research collected from the specific question on the survey, “Why do you visit the dog park” (RQ1).

4.0 Findings

Gómez' (2013) previous study in Norfolk was used as a point of comparison between users at both parks. Users at both dog parks overwhelmingly drove to the park (76%), while others either walked (16%), or drove and walked (8%). However, when separated into Norfolk and Virginia Beach dog park users, the picture is a very different one. In Virginia Beach, 98% of the users drove to the Red Wing Dog Park, while in Norfolk 56% drove, 31% walked, and the remaining respondents drove and walked to the Gold Star Dog Park (GSDP). This is likely due to the fact that the Norfolk dog park is located in a traditional residential neighborhood, whereas the Virginia Beach's RWDP is located off of a major thoroughfare. The question “Do you live in a surrounding neighborhood?” reflected this notion as 55% of Virginia Beach RWDP answered “no,” while 73% of Norfolk's GSDP users answered “yes” to this question.

For RQ1 in Norfolk, the three top themes were (a) interactions/socialization, (b) off-leash/open space and (c) sense of community (Gómez, 2013). For RQ1 in VB, the three top themes were (a) dog exercise, (b) socialization for dogs, and (c) safe place/space. Each of these will be discussed in turn by first noting the theme and following it with quotes from the open-ended responses to illustrate the theme.

4.1 Dog exercise

The first theme, dog exercise reflected the most prominent theme for visiting the dog park – to give dogs a place to run, exercise and play. For example, five respondents mentioned:

Exercise for my dog after being cooped up all day ... Exercise for my dog so he sleeps at night ... My dog loves to run and there is no fenced in area where we live ... To give my dog a place to play and be outside ... To wear down the dogs and enjoy the weather.

4.2 Socialization for dogs

The next identified theme was *socialization for dogs*. Seven respondents noted:

Interact with other dogs. Better socialization of animals = better behavior ... Dogs enjoy the social aspect of the experience ... Dogs need social interaction with people and dogs ... My dog is very friendly, Sundays are dog park day and allows socialization for her ... My dog needs a social life ... Play “dates” with other dogs ... To give my dog a place where he can socialize.

Some participants also noted joint social benefits for dogs and dog users. Four respondents said:

Gives my dog interaction and myself and family the same ... Mostly to let my dog play, but also to see some people ... Social/stress relief – I feel good that my dog is having a good time ... To let my dog play and see other dogs and talk with other dog owners.

4.3 Safe space

The last theme identified from RQ1 was having a *safe place that allows dogs to be off leash*. Six respondents stated:

Get to enjoy being out with dog in safe environment ... It is a big, open, safe space ... So my dog can have a safe place to exercise ... To allow my dog to run off leash ... To let Char run safely ... To let my dog play safely ... To exercise my dog and exercise him in a safe space.

5.0 Discussion and conclusion

Two themes were very similar. Both parks focused on the socialization aspects, although Norfolk’s dog park’s focus was more on human socialization, whereas Virginia Beach’s dog park was focused more on canine socialization. Additionally, both parks valued the space that the park provided. Again, the space theme was more nuanced. In the Norfolk dog park, the focus was the openness or physical aspects of the space. In Virginia Beach, the focus was more on the safety that the space provided. Additionally, the Virginia Beach dog park users also focused on the exercise that the space afforded their dogs. This theme also manifested itself in the Norfolk dog park, but was not one of the top three.

Clearly, the main difference between both the VB and the Norfolk dog parks is the sense of community/bonding aspect of the park that manifested itself in the Norfolk dog park (Gómez,

2013). We hypothesize that there might be two reasons for differences between the two dog park users. First, the Norfolk dog park is embedded within a neighborhood, which means that there might be more bonding opportunities. We hypothesize that the bonding and social capital created at the dog park in Norfolk might have some spillover in the neighborhood given the close proximity of the dog park to the neighborhood (Gómez). Second, the Norfolk dog park is in the most densely populated part of the city (Gómez), where there are fewer traditional back yards and more apartment buildings and dog owners have a greater need to use the facility, which could lead to stronger bonds with other dog users. Related to these issues, is the fact that the Virginia Beach dog park is a “destination” park, and visitors at the park may not be neighbors or people from the immediate surroundings.

The findings corroborate previous research related to the benefits of dog parks for dog/human socialization (Allen, 2007; American Kennel Club, n.d.), dog exercise (Lee et al., 2009), and safe spaces (Wolch & Rowe, 1992). From the perspective of the users, dog parks bring “something” to an area that promotes socialization and exercise for the dog and generally helps the neighborhood (Gómez, 2013). Although this case study provides a glimpse into reasons why dog owners use these dog parks, the qualitative analysis is limited to a specific park and we would not advocate broad generalization of our findings. More research is needed regarding specific questions quantifying our qualitative findings. Additionally, more focus should be given to non-users or neighbors that abut the park, as well as the general benefits/disadvantages that may be accrued at the neighborhood level.

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